

PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA - STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of the recorded history. Panchayat Raj is a system of governance in which Gram Panchayats are the basic units of administration. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been involved in the programme implementation and they constitute the core of decentralized development of planning and its implementation. Panchayat Raj Institutions aim at translating the Gandhian dream of village self-governance (Gram Swaraj) and to become an effective tool of rural development and reconstruction. Since 1959, almost all rural development departments have been executing their programmes through PRIs. With the implementation of State Acts under the spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment a clear cut role of Panchayat Raj Institutions in rural development has been envisaged. Government of India and the different State Governments are now increasingly seeking the assistance of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the implementation of various schemes as well as poverty alleviation programmes. The paper aims to highlight the system of Panchayat Raj system, role of Panchayat Raj institutions in the implementation of the government schemes for poverty alleviation and rural development, various government schemes, etc.

Key words: *backbone, effective, governance, implementation, institutions, reconstruction.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of the recorded history. Panchayat Raj is a system of governance in which Gram Panchayats are the basic units of administration. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been involved in the programme implementation and they constitute the core of decentralized development of planning and its implementation. Panchayat Raj Institutions aim at translating the Gandhian dream of village self-governance (Gram Swaraj) and to become an effective tool of rural development and reconstruction. Since 1959, almost all rural development departments have been executing their programmes through PRIs. With the implementation of State Acts under the spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment a clear cut role of Panchayat Raj Institutions in rural development has been envisaged. Government of India and the different State Governments are now increasingly seeking the assistance of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the implementation of various schemes as well as poverty alleviation programmes.

II. EVOLUTION AND FUNCTIONING OF PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS

Panchayats are India's ancient autonomous democratic institutions. Description of panchayats is found in the ancient Indian text 'Rigveda' in the form of 'Sabhas' and 'Samities'. Panchayat literally means assembly (yat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community.

The philosophy of Panchayat Raj is deeply steeped in tradition and culture of rural India. It is by no means a new concept. Panchayat Raj provided a system of self-governance at the village level. Panchayat Raj Institutions is the grass root unit of self-government. It has been declared as the vehicle of socio-economic transformation in rural India. Effective and meaningful functioning of these bodies would depend on active involvement contribution and participation of its citizens, both male and female.

III. OBJECTIVES OF PANCHAYAT

1. Assistance to the economically weaker sections of the community.
2. Cohesion and cooperative self help in the community.
3. Development of cooperative institutions.
4. Development of local resources including the utilization of manpower.
5. Production in agriculture as the highest priority in planning.
6. Progressive dispersal of authority and initiative both vertically and horizontally with special emphasis on the role of voluntary organizations.
7. Promotion of rural industries.
8. Understanding and harmony between the people's representatives and people servants through comprehensive training/education and a clear demarcation of duties and responsibilities.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERN OF PANCHAYATS

Panchayat Raj Institutions have been organized into three-tier system for enlisting people's participation in rural reconstruction, viz.,

1. The Gram Panchayat

Gram Panchayat is the primary unit of Panchayat Raj Institutions or local self-government. It is considered as the first formal democratic institution under the directive principle in the Indian constitution. It is a cabinet of the village elders, directly elected by the adult citizens of the village. The Panchayat has tenure of five years and is directly elected. It has income through taxes to perform its functions.

V. MAIN FUNCTIONS OF VILLAGE PANCHAYATS

1. Preparation of Annual Plans for the development of the village Panchayat area.
2. Preparation Annual Budget of Village Panchayat.
3. Mobilization of relief in natural calamities.
4. Removal of encroachments on public properties.
5. Organizing voluntary labours and contribution for community works.
6. Maintenance of essential statistics of villages.
7. Such other development works as may be entrusted.

8. Service or developmental function, such as promotion of education, health, agriculture, etc.
9. Representative function, where the main role is to voice and represent the opinion;
10. Regulatory and administrative functions, which consists of regulating the conduct of individuals and institutions and also collection of taxes.

VI. SOURCES OF INCOME OF VILLAGE PANCHAYATS

1. Share in land revenue.
2. Local tax.
3. Revenue earned from the settlement of shops, fisheries, etc
4. House taxes & other taxes as specified in Panchayat Raj Act.
5. Fees for providing amenities, cess, tolls.
6. Contribution and grants.
7. Fine and penalties.

VII. TALUKA/BLOCK PANCHAYAT

This is the second tier of the administration at Taluka or Block level. This is headed by Taluka President. Block Development Officer is appointed by the Government. He functions as the leader of the Block.

VIII. Zilla Panchayat

Zilla Panchayat is also known as District Development Council or Zilla Parishad. This is the third tier of Panchayat Raj functioning at district level. It is headed by Panchayat Union Chairman. District Collector leads the work with the help of District Development Officers.

Panchayat Raj system gave significant progress in the fields of primary and secondary education, communication, agricultural extension, cooperation, health, etc. People could get drinking water. In some places people had protected water supply, Village streets, electric light provision, village sanitation, etc., had enough resources. Rural awakening was brought up among rural people; as a result villagers became conscious of their rights and improved their standard of living.

IX. RURAL DEVELOPMENT – CONCEPTUAL DIMENSIONS

Rural development connotes overall development of rural areas with a view to improve the quality of life of the rural people. It is a comprehensive and multi-dimensional concept and encompasses the development of Agriculture and allied activities, Village and cottage industries and crafts, Socio-economic infrastructure, Community services and facilities and Human resources development in rural areas

Rural development is a phenomenon is the end result of interactions between various physical, technological, economic, socio-cultural and institutional factors.

Rural development is a strategy is designed to improve the economic and social wellbeing of a specific group of people – the rural poor. Rural development as a discipline is multi-disciplinary in nature, representing an intersection of agricultural social behavioural, engineering and management sciences.

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X. BASIC ELEMENTS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Despite the differences in geographical location, culture and historical stage of development of a country there are three basic elements which are considered to constitute the true meaning of Rural development viz.,

XI. BASIC NECESSITIES OF LIFE

The basic necessities of life for people for sustaining them include food, clothes, shelter, basic literacy, primary health care and security of life and property. Provision of these basic necessities of life to everybody is the primary responsibility of all the economies. It is the necessary condition for improvement of quality of life or rural people which forms part of rural development.

XII. SELF RESPECT

Self respect, dignity and honour of every person should form part of rural development programmes.

XIII. FREEDOM

Freedom of people should be ensured in different aspects of life in rural areas like economic freedom, ideological freedom, and freedom from social servitude. Servitude of any form reflects a state of under development.

XIV. NEED FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The predominantly rural character of India's national economy is reflected in very high proportion of its population living in rural areas. It was 89 percent in 1901, 83 percent in 1951, 80 percent in 1971, 74 percent in 1991 and 72.22 percent in 2001. With more than 740 million of its population living in rural areas, with the rural sector contributing about 30 percent of the gross domestic product no strategy of socio-economic development for India which neglects the rural people and rural areas can be successful. Rural development is therefore an absolute and urgent necessity in India.

XV. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Government of India has taken many initiatives for rural development. It has setup the Ministry of Rural Development. This Ministry is a nodal department for the two international organizations viz., the centre on Integrated Rural Development of Asia and the Pacific (IRDAP) and the Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization (AARDO).

XVI. Rural Development through Panchayat Raj Institutions

Panchayat Raj Institutions are involved actively in fulfilling the most cherished goal of development with social justice bringing the aspirations of the Indian people for their participation in the development process of the country. A clear cut role for Panchayat Raj Institutions in rural development has been envisaged subsequent to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Government of India and the state Governments have been increasingly seeking the assistance of Panchayat Raj Institutions in the implementation of various schemes as well as poverty alleviation programmes. Of these the following development programmes of the Government of India and the

state governments have invariably sought a meaningful involvement of the Panchayat Raj Institutions. A specific role has been carved out for them in the context of the eleventh schedule and the Five Year Plans. The following programmes are implemented through the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), Samagra Awas Yojana (SAY), Tribal Area Development Programme (TADP), Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana (PMGY), Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and many others.

Panchayat Raj Institutions are involved in rural development through their participation in planning and execution at the village level. Gram Sabha which is an integral part of the Panchayat system is being empowered to involve all the people in the decentralized planning. Even though, funds and sanctioning power may still be at different level but when the question comes for execution of programmes, there is no alternative but to involve. The Panchayat Raj Institutions at the village level. There is no substitute to local governance for meeting the needs of the local population. The 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendments recognized that necessity. The lowest tier of the local government namely the Gram Panchayat is directly in contact with the citizen and can be taken to task in the Gram Sabha and by other means. It is responsible for a number of functions ranging from simple civil functions to complex development planning. But it could carry out these functions only when adequate powers and resources are devolved on it.

XVII. EMPOWERING THE PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS

The issue of empowering the Panchayat Raj Institutions involves transferring of (i) funds, (ii) functions and (iii) functionaries, to them has been a central point of discussion between the centre and the states. The planning commission and the Ministry of Rural Development have repeatedly impressed upon the state governments. The need for transferring these resources in respect of 29 subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the Constitution of India to the Panchayats (Sinha Subodh Kumar and Rajesh Kumar (2007). These subjects are- Agriculture including agricultural extension, Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development, Animal husbandry, Fisheries, Social forestry farm, Minor forest produce, Land improvement, implementation land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation, Small scale industries including food processing industries, Khadi, village and cottage industries, Rural housing, Drinking water, Fuel and fodder, Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of transport and communication, Rural electrification including distribution of electricity, Non-conventional energy, Poverty alleviation programmes, Education including primary and secondary schools, Technical training and vocational education, Adult and non-formal education, Libraries, Cultural activities, Markets and fairs, Health and sanitation including hospitals primary health centres and dispensaries, Family welfare, Women and child development, Social welfare including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded, Welfare of the weaker section in particular welfare of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, Public distribution system and Maintenance of community assets.

The 29 subjects mentioned above are listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution of India. They cover all the key aspects of village life. However, in spite of the 73rd Amendment most of the states have transferred very little power and financial resources to the Panchayat.

XVIII. AREAS OF CONSTRAINTS

The effective involvement of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the process of rural development is constrained by some difficulties facing these institutions. The problems largely relate finance, management and organization. The Panchayat Raj Institutions are not provided with adequate powers and resources though the states have thrust lot of responsibilities on these. There is a problem of lack of understanding the laws and rules governing the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

“The elected members should understand the law through training sessions but controlling the officials is a problem. They are often able to use the ancient structure of rules and procedures to scuttle schemes unanimously approved by the elected bodies. One way to address the problem is to make the Panchayat and related link department officials attend the training sessions for the elected members. At least some of the trainers should be effectively used by the elected members to address the problems created by the lower level officials. Another problem of the effectiveness of Panchayat Raj Institutions in their functioning for rural development relates to lack of effective participation of members particularly women members in the local governance. The problem arises due to low literacy level without some level of education understanding the laws and the changes in rules and procedures periodically brought out. Panchayat Raj Institutions can be effective in their role to bring about rural development only if they are governed by a sound and scientific structure of governance. The members of these local institutions suffer from crisis of confidence and low level of self esteem. It is found that the present election system has brought in ignorant and illiterates into the system. There is also the incidence of excessive interference of government and politicians in the affairs of the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

XXI. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMMES OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS

A brief analysis of the following major rural development programmes implemented through Panchayat Raj Institutions has been provided here.

1. Swarna Jayanthi Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), 1999

This single self employment programme of Swarna Jayanthi Gram Swarozgar Yojana was launched on 1-04-1999. This program has been conceived to overcome the weaknesses of earlier schemes of Integrated Rural Development Programme and allied programmes TRYSEM, DWCRA, SITRA and Ganga Kalyan Yojana. Subsidy is given to the enterprises under this scheme SGSY is financed on 75:25 cost sharing basis between the centre and the states. SGSY is implemented by the District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs) through Panchayat Samitis. The implementation of SGSY calls for integration of various agencies like DRDAs banks, Panchayat Raj Institutions, NGO etc.

2. Sampoorna Grameena Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) 2001

This programme was launched by merging the ongoing schemes – Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) and Jawahar Gram Samridhhi Yojana (JGSY) on 25th September 2001. The objective of the programme is to provide additional wage employment in rural areas as also food security alongside the creation of durable community, social and economic infrastructure in the rural areas.

3. Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) (1985-86)

The programme was started in 1985-86 during the Ninth Plan. It aims at providing “Housing for all” and facilitates construction of 20 lakh additional dwelling units of which 13 lakh dwelling units were to be constructed in rural areas. Panchayati Raj Institutions have an important role in the identification of the beneficiaries under IAY. Beneficiaries will be selected from the Permanent IAY Waitlists prepared on the basis of BPL lists in order of seniority in the list. The Gram Panchayats may draw out the shelterless families from the BPL list. Selection by the Gram Sabha is final.

4. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY-2000)

The Yojana was launched in 2000 to cover one crore poor families. The schemes envisaged providing food grains to BPL families at a highly subsidised rate of Rs. 2 per kg for wheat and Rs. 3 per kg for rice. The AAY scheme was expanded in 2003-04 by adding another 50 lakh house holds from among BPL families and further to cover 2.5 crore households.

5. Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY-2000)

This is a hundred per cent centrally sponsored scheme launched on 25th December 2000. The primary objective of PMGSY was to provide connectivity to all un-connected habitations in the rural areas having a population of more than 500 persons. Under Bharat Nirman goal has been set to provide connectivity to all habitations with population of more than 1000 in the plain area.

6. Nirmal Grama Yojana (1999)

The Government of Karnataka has launched a massive campaign in the name of ‘Nirmal Grama Yojana’ on 2nd October 1995 for improvement of sanitary conditions as a part of socio-economic development of rural areas. The Government has been implementing the scheme in cooperation with Panchayat Raj Institutions and non-government organizations.

7. National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP-1995)

This programme initiated by the Central Government aims at providing social assistance benefit to poor households in the case of old age, death of primary bread winner and maternity. The main features of the three components of NSAP are 1) National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS), 2) National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS) and 3) National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS).

8. National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)

National Rural Livelihood Mission advocates creation of formal mechanisms for mutually beneficial working relationship, consultations and sharing of resources between Panchayats and institutions of the poor. Ex: SHGs

9. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA-2009)

The programme was launched on 2nd February 2006. It envisages securing the livelihood of people in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of employment in a financial year to rural households. MGNREGA marks a paradigm shift from all earlier and existing wage employment programmes because it is an Act and not just a scheme. It provides legal guarantee to work.

MGNREGA provides a powerful, legal entitlement and opportunity to realise the objectives of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. The Act formally declares the Panchayats at the three levels as principal authorities for planning and implementation of the Schemes made under this Act and this provision is backed up by substantial guaranteed resources.

Panchayats are more than instruments for implementation of the Act; they have an intrinsic value in realising the expected outcome of enhanced livelihood security for the poor. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been entrusted with following roles and responsibilities in the implementation of MGNREGA Gram Panchayat:

Receiving applications for registration, Verifying registration applications, Registering households, Issuing Job Cards, Receiving applications for work, Issuing dated receipts for these applications for work, Allotting work within fifteen days of submitting the application or from the date when work is sought in the case of an advance application, whichever is later, irrespective of the implementing agency, Conducting periodical surveys to assess demand for work, Identification and planning of works, developing shelf of projects including determination of the order of their priority. This list is forwarded to Programme Officer for scrutiny and preliminary approval, Executing works that shall meet the required technical standards and measurements, Maintaining records, Maintaining accounts and providing utilization certificates in formats prescribed by Central/ State Government, Prepare annually a report containing the facts and figures and achievements relating to the implementation of the Scheme within its jurisdiction and, copy of the same to be made available to the public, Awareness generation and social mobilization, Convening the Gram Sabha for planning and social audit, Making available all relevant documents including the Muster Rolls, bills, vouchers, measurement books, copies of sanction orders and other connected books of account and papers to the Gram Sabha for the purpose of conducting the social audit, Monitoring implementation at the village level, Pro-actively disclosing following information relating to worksites, wages paid, material component etc., and names of persons with job cards quantify and price of materials purchased for each project etc. and Providing all information specified in Audit of Schemes Rules to the Social Audit Unit. There is a definite role for Gram Sabha, Intermediate Panchayat and District Panchayat in the implementation of schemes under MGNREGA.

XX. CONCLUSION

Panchayats are India's ancient autonomous democratic institutions. Description of panchayats is found in the ancient Indian text 'Rigveda' in the form of 'Sabhas' and 'Samities'. Panchayat literally means assembly (yat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community.

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